

SINCE TIME IMMEMORIAL: TRIBAL SOVEREIGNTY IN WASHINGTON STATE

On Sovereignty, 1.1: Tribal Homelands/The First Nations of North America

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If you were born and raised in one town or city, then you might know it as your '**homeland**'. You might consider this your 'homeland' because it is where your school is, where your friends are, and where family works and plays.

And your family might call the other countries where your ancestors came from your homelands, too. This is closer to what tribal people consider their homelands, but there are still differences that make tribal homelands different from other cultures'. You will learn about those differences beginning today.

We might think of a nation as being a lot bigger and maybe far across the sea. Each nation has different languages, religions, customs and holidays from our own.

Some people find it hard to believe that such nations are right here in the United States. But they are here. In what is now called Washington State, there are over 29 distinct Indian nations, each with its own government, citizens, laws, and traditions.

They are the Suquamish and Snoqualmie, the Spokane and the Skokomish. There are many other tribes here in Washington State and each is a separate nation. Their nations may be much smaller than the United States, but still they have their **sovereign** lands and the responsibility to govern them.

Long time ago, probably when your great, great, great, great grandparents were alive, people traveled to this country and knew there were other people already living here. The newcomers did not realize at first that the native tribes had societies just as organized as their own. There were more than 500 different nations. Each tribe had its own homeland and borders, so each also had its own government, laws, religion, economy, and traditions. Though tribes did not have passports when they wanted to travel to another tribal nation, like today when we want to visit other countries, there were rules for entering another's homeland that everyone was expected to follow and respect.

When non-Indian people got to this part of the land, they wanted to be able to live among the different tribes, so they made promises and agreements with many of the tribes. The written agreements, known as **treaties**, had everyone's signature on it to prove that they all agreed to it. For example, in exchange for millions of acres of land, local tribes received promises of education, healthcare, and other things that the US Government would provide. These lands, much smaller than their original homelands, and in some cases, far away from their original homelands, are known as **reservations**.

Whenever the United States signs a treaty with another nation, like England, Russia, or Canada, the treaty becomes the law that tells how the nations treat each other, and that any other laws they make cannot break any of the agreements that were made in the treaties. In the US Constitution, it calls treaties "the supreme law of the land."

The tribal people gave up large parts of their original homelands in the agreements, but they wanted to continue to fish, hunt and gather their foods on the original homelands given to them by **The Creator**. Everyone agreed that tribes could continue their traditional fishing, hunting, and gathering on their original homelands, even if it was off their newly created reservations. Everyone accepted that tribes could continue the traditions they had kept since **time immemorial**, or since the beginning of time.

These treaties also said the tribal people could continue speaking their own language, keep their own religions, keep their traditions and cultures and continue using their own tribal laws.

Today we know this as **tribal sovereignty**, and it allows today's tribal people the ability to continue their **lifeways**, or to live the way they want to. This might seem much like how your family lives in your own community, but there is an important difference. Since tribal people believe that **The Creator** (who many people call God) gave them this land to live on, they also believe that The Creator's gift comes with their **sacred** promise and responsibility to take care of the land, its resources, and all its creatures. Some plateau tribes, like the Umatilla, call this their **covenant with The Creator**. While tribes may call this sacred responsibility and trust different things, the belief is the same: Tribes need to make sure that their natural resources are not just here for them today, but for their great, great, great, great, great, great grandchildren, too. That means tribal people are

looking 140 or more years into the future when making decisions on how to care for their people and their homelands today!

But just like not all Canadians live in Canada, and not all Chinese live in China, there are many tribal people who choose to live off their reservations. For example, living in the large cities of Spokane and Seattle are many tribal people from many different tribes. Indians living in larger cities off their reservations often call themselves **Urban Indians**. Tribal people who live in big cities work to create their own communities to keep their traditions alive, just like the many Asian and Pacific Islanders who formed Seattle's International District.

The tribal nations themselves also have their own museums and organizations to educate everyone, Indians and non-Indians, about their traditions, governments, and hopes for their futures. Find the tribes in your area and discover their history, traditions, and how their **tribal sovereignty** affects everyone in Washington State. Even you!

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